Unnatural History

Lütticken, S.

published in
New Left Review
2007

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

citation for published version (APA)
Lütticken, S. (2007). Unnatural History. *New Left Review*, *45*, 115-131.

SVEN LÜTTICKEN

UNNATURAL HISTORY

After a comparative lull in the 1990s, when free-market propagandists announced the imminent realization of the best of all possible worlds, dramatic ecological warnings have once again taken centre stage in the news media. Now that there is an overwhelming consensus among scientists, politicians and journalists that the rise in temperatures can no longer be regarded as one of the normal, periodic fluctuations in the earth's climate, a new natural history seems to be in the making: from sandstorms sweeping through Beijing to constantly flooding rivers in Central Europe, from melting polar ice-caps to rising sea-levels, there is no shortage of natural events that seem disturbingly unnatural. Climate change, however, is merely the most dramatic of a number of developments—genetic technology being another—that change nature to an unprecedented degree.

In a situation in which nature is apparently being changed through human interventions while, conversely, human culture is increasingly dominated by this new nature, it is of crucial importance to reconsider the relationship between natural and human history, and to arrive at a more historicized conception of nature than occurs in popular science discourse—which naturalizes culture by focusing on the unchanging, animal side of the 'naked ape'. There have been some attempts to do this—notably by Francis Fukuyama, who in 1989 appropriated Kojève's appropriation of Hegel to proclaim the end of history, but now observes that 'there can be no end of history without an end of modern natural science and technology'.[1] History reasserts itself in the form of genetic research, which alters human nature itself, raising numerous questions about human rights and citizenship. While many either celebrate or fret about 'our posthuman future', to quote the title of Fukuyama's 2002 book, others have sought to chart, as it were, our human non-future; examples include Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* and Nicholas

Stern's report for the UK Treasury on climate change. For ecological collapse threatens the survival, if not of our species, then at least of the current social order.

Both attempts at historicization are, however, limited by their general adherence to a liberal conception of history, in which the ideal marriage of a democratic nation-state and a capitalist economy is still the ultimate goal, the only desirable future. While the Stern report emphasizes the need for forms of planning and regulation, for instance through carbon trading schemes, others maintain that the economic regime that caused the problem—or at least significantly contributed to it—will also provide the cure. If increased pollution is indeed a by-product of the incredible inventiveness set free by capitalism, capitalism will also create the means of fighting pollution, giving rise to cleaner and less wasteful forms of production and consumption. There are opportunities for growth even in the green sector. In this way, the new nature is reintegrated in the symbolic edifice, as capitalism once more proves its adaptability.

In his early essay on 'The Idea of Natural History', Theodor Adorno stated that 'the question of the relationship between nature and history only stands a chance of being answered when one succeeds in *understanding historical being, even in its utmost historical determinacy, as a natural [*naturhaftes*] being, or in grasping nature as historical being, even where it is apparently most resistant and static.*'[2] Adorno notes that he uses 'nature' as more or less synonymous with 'myth', both terms standing for life in the grip of fate, subject to fear, before humanity asserted control over nature.[3] Current discourse, inflected by popularizers of Darwin, to some extent follows Adorno's deconstruction of the identification of nature with dumb, mythical being: nature is itself already historical. But whereas Adorno also argued that human history results in another nature, in a return of myth, contemporary conceptualizations of the new, unnatural natural history often avoid probing the deadlocks of a culture still absorbing the shockwaves of the new nature. These omissions work to undermine possibilities for radical change, even while signalling imminent collapse. On the rare occasions when historical changes in nature are noted in today's discourse, these are integrated

[1] Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, New York 2002, p. 15.

[2] Theodor Adorno, 'Die Idee der Naturgeschichte' [1933], in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main 1973, pp. 354–5; emphasis in original.

[3] Adorno, 'Idee der Naturgeschichte', p. 345.

into the 'natural being' of the current regime, rather than used to question its quasi-natural status.

The musings of liberal authors such as Jared Diamond are typical in this respect: comparing 'ecocides' in various historical and contemporary societies, Diamond tries to draw lessons that can be applied to the approaching global ecological disaster, but his comparative approach and focus on social, biological and psychological invariants robs the current situation of much of its specificity. In the end we are only left with consoling 'examples of courageous leaders and courageous people' who did the right thing.[4] For today's liberals, the collapse of the existing order can solely be imagined in biological and ecological terms; social and political change can only take the form of minor adjustments. Even an author as concerned and informed as Diamond is unable to think beyond this limit. The free market or 'liberal democracy' appears as a second nature whose collapse would be more dramatic than that of the physical environment.

Within these constraints, however, dark scenarios can still emerge. In 2006, Oliver Curry, LSE-based editor of *Darwinism Today*, predicted that 100,000 years into the future, the human race will be divided into two separate races—termed 'gracile' and 'robust'. As the BBC reported, 'the descendants of the genetic upper class would be tall, slim, healthy, attractive, intelligent, creative, and a far cry from the "underclass" humans who would have evolved into dim-witted, ugly, squat goblin-like creatures.'[5] While this breeding fantasy in the spirit of H. G. Wells's Morlocks and Eloi makes no explicit reference to genetic engineering, it is clear that one of the elite's advantages is having access to advanced technology in this and other fields. In spite—or because—of its delusional qualities, the 'two races' scenario shows the limits of well-meaning liberal narratives, in which the means of containing threats to the current order are seen to lie in that very order. Its bluntness at least has the advantage of making explicit what remains hidden in paeans to the problem-solving power of capitalism: in an age of collapse, the odds are far from even, both within Western societies and on a global scale.

Contemporary culture is often branded ahistorical, seen as marked by repetitious vogues and industrial nostalgia. This condition seems now to

---

[4] Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, New York 2005, p. 440.

[5] 'Human species "may split in two"', BBC News website, 17 October 2006.

have dissipated, with history reasserting itself as natural history in a period of global political and economic turmoil. But despite the consensus that global warming cannot be ascribed to normal fluctuations in the earth's temperature, the human and therefore social and political components of this process have been minimized; man-made nature is re-naturalized, the new (un)natural history presented as fate. The truly terrifying notion is not that it is irreversible, but that it actually might be reversible—at the cost of radically changing the economic and social order.

Awful changes

A major point of reference in Adorno's 'The Idea of Natural History' is Benjamin's work on the *Trauerspiel*, in which the latter attributed to Baroque drama a conception of history as a process of ruin, subject to elementary forces of nature. It is telling that Benjamin draws a parallel between Baroque and Romanticism as the two great anti-Classicist tendencies. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Baroque fixation on *Vergänglichkeit*—a notion of transience that had served as a religious memento mori—was transformed into the scientific investigation of nature as liable to dramatic change.[6] This period saw a radical historicization of nature and the abandonment of Biblical chronology in favour of what would later be termed 'deep time'—a long natural history preceding the emergence of the human race, populated by creatures that were reconstructed by Georges Cuvier, William Buckland and others. 'Natural time' was no longer that of seasonal cycles; such returns were now plotted on a historical axis of previously unimaginable scale. However, this axis in turn was beset by cataclysmic convulsions that suggested a repetitive pattern. Human culture itself was now a potential ruin; at the end of the century, H. G. Wells would send his time traveller to the post-human future of the Morlocks and Eloi. Past stages of life were also brought to life again, in phantasmal scenes of deep time created by artists and writers.[7]

---

[6] Adorno, 'Idee der Naturgeschichte', pp. 357–8; Walter Benjamin, 'Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels' [1928], in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, part 1, Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 352–3.

[7] On deep time iconography, see Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow/Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time,* Cambridge, MA and London 1987; Martin Rudwick, *Scenes from Deep Time: Early Pictorial Representations of the Prehistoric World,* Chicago and London 1992.

Among the many nineteenth-century visualizations of 'antediluvian' scenes, Henry de la Beche's 1830 illustration of various ichthyosaurs and other prehistoric creatures engaged in a proto-Darwinist struggle for life was particularly influential. In a clear and humorous style that others would soon abandon in favour of heavy drama, de la Beche—who was part of the geological and paleontological vanguard of the period—depicted a prehistoric dog-eat-dog world, a marine orgy of hyperactive beaks and writhing bodies, in which no animal ever seems to have a moment of rest.[8] In its more garish versions, this iconography became popular from the 1840s onwards, also occurring in literature: a similar battle takes place in Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) while the heroes are crossing an underground lake—past moments of deep time preserved in the bowels of the earth.[9] In Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* and its 1922 film adaptation, dinosaurs have survived through the ages on an isolated plateau; in *King Kong*—essentially *Lost World* with an added ape—they live on a remote island.

Such fictions, in which dinosaurs and other prehistoric animals turn out to be less than extinct, can be related to a well-known satirical example of deep-time iconography, again by Henry de la Beche. Its heading announces 'Awful changes', and it shows a 'Professor Ichthyosaurus' lecturing to his fellow creatures about a human skull, said to have 'belonged to some of the lower orders of animals'. This 1830 cartoon of the 'Reappearance of Ichthyosauri' was once thought to refer to the famous geologist William Buckland, but Stephen Jay Gould has shown that it is a barb aimed at Charles Lyell, who advocated a cyclic model for the earth's history in the early editions of his influential *Principles of Geology*.[10] Lyell refused to accept that the geological records suggest directionality—an evolution of species from the simple to the more complex, with certain species becoming extinct. He argued that while environmental shifts might cause periodic changes in the fauna of a region, none were final. In the passage lampooned by de la Beche, Lyell claimed that creatures very similar to the ichthyosaurs, and dinosaurs

[8] Rudwick, *Scenes from Deep Time*, pp. 64–7; while de la Beche's depiction of ancient Dorset—*Duria antiquor*—is certainly whimsical, Rudwick's description of the image as 'cheerful' and 'neoclassical' plays down the Hoffmannesque and uncanny qualities of the image, which must have been even more pronounced for viewers unaccustomed to seeing prehistoric animals.

[9] See David Standish, *Hollow Earth*, Cambridge, MA 2006, pp. 132–236.

[10] Gould, *Time's Arrow*, pp. 89–179.

whose skeletons were being discovered on the Dorset coast and in quarries, might yet live in remote parts of the world—and might show up again in England when conditions once more suited them.

Lost worlds

The non-directional vision that Lyell attempted to impose on deep time could be seen as a *répétition du mythe*, a regressive reassertion of a cyclic worldview, as Benjamin characterized nineteenth-century theories of eternal return, Nietzsche's foremost among them.[11] But Nietzsche's idea was itself a late, Pythagorean version of the cyclical conception of time, which modern mythologists such as Eliade identified with traditional societies. Eliade argues that the latter managed to keep the 'terror of history' at bay by conceiving of time as the cyclic repetition of archetypes, of events and symbols belonging to a primeval period when gods or mythic ancestors walked the earth. In Ancient Greece, pre-Socratic thinkers—the Pythagoreans foremost—radicalized this approach with the notion that everything will eternally recur; every moment in effect becomes an archetype that will return countless times.[12] However, Nietzsche concluded that ancient Pythagorean notions of eternal repetition are hardly applicable to historical events, which are in many ways specific and unique. A genuine repetition of such events would only be possible if the earth were to start its 'drama' anew after the first act; this is what the later Nietzsche gambled on with his doctrine of the eternal return.[13]

Nietzsche's struggle with the notion of an eternal return had started in the early 1870s, as he was reflecting precisely on the nineteenth century's infatuation with history. He speculated that historicism might yet prove to be productive; if one realized that the Renaissance had been created by a mere hundred men, such a breakthrough might be repeated. Deleuze argued that Nietzsche's 'abysmal' notion of the eternal return takes the concept to its extreme, emphasizing that eternal recurrence not based on mythic archetypes can only lead to signs without referent,

---

[11] Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk* [1927–40], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol 5, part 1, Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 177–8.

[12] Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* [1954], Princeton 2005, pp. 89, 119–23.

[13] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen II: Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben* [1874], in Nietzsche, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol 3, part 1, Berlin 1972, p. 237.

and hence to difference.[14] While modern culture 'remythifies' repetition by using either specific historical models or clichéd templates that function as industrial archetypes, its quasi-cyclic recurrence is not a closed system. Under the impact of historical shocks, the repetitions of mass culture may produce unnatural mutations that serve as signs and portents of change—as exemplified by recurrent motifs of nineteenth- and twentieth-century deep-time fiction.

Doyle's *The Lost World* might initially be seen as a fictional realization of Lyell's myth of eternal return—in a climate befitting them, and cut off from their enemies, dinosaurs have indeed survived. However, the ideological subtext is decidedly un-Lyellian. Doyle's work is deeply ingrained with imperialist progressivism: white British explorers finding a freak of nature that gives insight into natural history rather than undermining history, a time capsule that does not undo directionality. Rather than depicting the survival of isolated pockets of deep time, meanwhile, *Jurassic Park* and its sequels show the reconstruction of extinct species, courtesy of modern technology. As instances of new, manmade nature spinning dangerously out of control, these dinosaurs stand in for tsunamis, rising sea levels and desertification. Clones of old genetic models, the neo-dinosaurs naturalize the unnatural new nature; but the fact that they quickly escape from human control suggests that recurrence can shatter a given state of affairs. A similar mix of forward- and backward-looking elements is to be found in J. G. Ballard's 1962 novel, *The Drowned World*, which depicts a world being made uninhabitable by rising temperatures and sea levels. The cause of this is not science gone awry, but a 'sudden instability of the sun.'[15] In this respect, Ballard may seem to be looking backward, shying away from addressing manmade environmental collapse. However, the very fact that the cause of environmental change in Ballard's early novels—including his superior *The Crystal World*—is utterly uncontrollable, and sometimes unknown, creates an uncanny sense of an unnatural history in the making.

Such deep-time fantasies, which restore historicity to nature by means of cyclical returns, are an obvious source for current discourse on climate change. Scenarios of the future are riddled with ideological fictions;

[14] Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, Paris 1968. Deleuze was building on the brilliant essays of Pierre Klossowski in *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle* [1969], London 2005.

[15] J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* [1962], London 1999, p. 70.

many, in fact, try to marshal the power of these fictions for their purposes. Ballard's vision of a future half-submerged London has cinematic offspring that include *Waterworld* (1995) and Kubrick/Spielberg's *A.I.* (2001), as well as Al Gore's depiction of New York being inundated. Gore and others make pragmatic use of deep-time fiction to try to make 'us' aware of the risks of our Western lifestyle, if we do not mend our ways (though we should remain loyal consumers in order to keep the economy going). But they refrain from foregrounding and questioning their own status. Content to dramatize the dangerous direction in which nature is heading due to human interventions, they nonetheless view these interventions as specific practices that cause pollution, and only marginally or intermittently as symptoms of a society as thoroughly unstable as the new nature they seek to address. They thus offer no fundamental alternative to the suggestion that the course taken by nature due to human activities is as inevitable and unchangeable as the trajectory of society itself.

Social disasters are naturalized and 'natural' disasters are seen as man-made but not open to intervention—society in turn being perceived as subject to quasi-natural fatality. In this context, the time of capitalist modernity unfolds as a dialectic of cataclysmic repetitions and a linearity whose apparent inevitability is itself mythical, as Benjamin saw very clearly. If the culture industry's repetitions can register and suggest change, then change itself becomes another form of mythical fate, distributing wealth and health to some, disaster to others. Seeing New Orleans destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, one need not reach for conspiracy theories concerning the incompetence of the Bush Administration and FEMA to conclude that all parties effectively acted as if trying to cement the belief that both nature and society, as second nature, are so far beyond control as to make any attempt at intervention an exercise in futility.

Second natures

Both in 'The Idea of Natural History' and much later, in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno relied on the young Lukács's Marxian reading of the Hegelian concept of second nature. This signified an 'alienated, dead world', a reified representation of impoverished social relationships.[16] Here 'second nature' comes to stand for the ossified products of human labour, as a fetishistic spectacle of apparently autonomous artifacts beyond human

[16] Adorno, 'Idee der Naturgeschichte', pp. 355–6.

control—while 'first nature' itself, subjected as it is by science, undergoes a similar process. If this Lukácsian–Adornian take on second nature differs from earlier, Idealist uses, these were already varied: whereas Hegel remained close to the common meaning of second nature as 'convention', the later Schelling historicized the concept.

'Second nature' has a long history as a signifier for 'convention', from Cicero through to Montaigne and Pascal, but it gained a new meaning, and new urgency, with Rousseau—and with the simplified interpretation of Rousseau's thought as demanding a 'return to nature', conceived as a state of grace and innocence. In the historical turn of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century thinking, 'second nature' came to be seen—by Schiller, among others—as the potential reassertion in human society of something resembling the immediacy and harmony of nature, possibly with the aid of art.[17] Hegel, of course, is strictly against such a conceptualization of second nature. Crucially, for him, the bad immediacy of 'first nature' has been shattered, and there can be no return to it; attempts to reform morality and customs 'in accordance with nature' are extremely dubious. Stating that the system of law is 'a second nature' insofar as it is not just externally imposed but lived, he considers that *das Sittliche*—what is morally just—becomes a *Sitte*: a custom, second nature. If the grip of habit becomes too strong, its effects are negative. Hegel notes that 'man also dies out of habit', and that Spirit itself is movement, shattering the sameness of nature. Speaking of ancient Egypt, he stresses that a state of civilization in which everything is fixed and conventional, a comfortably inhabited second nature, is 'against the nature of the Spirit'; it is Spirit's historical task to shatter such complacent habits.[18]

Whereas Hegel's conception of second nature is still indebted to its old meaning of 'convention', Schelling effectively uses 'second nature' as a synonym for Spirit and its historical unfolding. As Schelling puts it in the final version of the *Philosophy of Mythology*, human history amounts to a second creation.[19] Nature pales in comparison to this new form of history—it is a closed circle, a realm without history. He repeatedly

---

[17] See Norbert Rath, *Zweite Natur. Konzepte einer Vermittlung von Natur und Kultur in Anthropologie und Ästhetik um 1800*, Münster 1996.

[18] G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlagen der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatsrecht im Grundrisse* (*Werke*, vol. 7), Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 302; and *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (*Werke*, vol. 12), Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 255.

[19] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie* (part 2) in *Schellings Werke. Fünfter Ergänzungsband*, Munich 1943, p. 10.

states that the creation was the result of the dialectical interplay of three *Potenzen*, powers or potencies that are three aspects of God: pure *Seinkönnen* (what-can-be) or the subject, pure *Sein* (being) or the object, and the subject-object that is the *Geist*. In the absolute, before creation, these potencies were latent; they were activated by an immemorial act, a transition from latent *Wille* (will) to active *Wollen* (wanting) around which Schelling's late work circles.[20] While these three powers and their dialectical movements have their equivalents in Hegel's thought, Schelling argues that Hegel's dialectics remained merely logical, that Hegelian philosophy, starting from the idea, can never come to terms with the act of creation itself, nor with actual history.[21] The third potency—that of Spirit, which is self-conscious *Können* or the complete manifestation of the subject in the object—triumphs in human consciousness. This is 'the end of nature', the emergence of 'a second world, the spiritual one' in human consciousness, above nature.[22]

While Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* stresses the progressive spiritualization and thus the historicity of nature, this movement could only go so far; in the end, nature settled into cyclic patterns that were to be shattered by human history. However, Schelling still conceives of the theogonic process in the human mind—the gradual revelation of God in mythology—as a natural process, because it is a causal chain of events in that mind, rather than a direct divine revelation.[23] In this respect his work reflects the developments of the early nineteenth century, when 'natural history' became historical in the modern sense. When Schelling conceives of human history—as encapsulated in mythology—as natural history, he is applying the new paradigm to the former, even while downplaying the historicity of 'first nature'. Mythology as a succession

[20] The system of the three potencies is discussed and developed throughout the late *Philosophie der Mythologie* and *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, repeatedly given as lecture courses during the 1830s and 40s, and published posthumously. See for instance *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, in *Schellings Werke, Sechster Ergänzungsband*, Munich 1954, chapters 4, 5 and 8 (pp. 55–93, 147–74).

[21] See the extensive criticism of Hegel delivered in the Berlin version of the lectures on Revelation, delivered in 1841–42, known through Paulus's transcript, published as F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42*, Frankfurt am Main 1977, pp. 121–39.

[22] Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42*, p. 107.

[23] See F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie* (part 1), in *Schellings Werke, Sechster Hauptband: Schriften zur Religionsphilosophie 1841–1854*, Munich 1927, pp. 378–9.

of gods, as historical polytheism, is shaped by the interplay of the three potencies, but these act now as purely natural causes. Man, he argues, wanted to rule freely over the three potencies, but instead came to be ruled by them. Slowly extracting himself from his fallen state, Man developed a mythology that enabled the human mind to rise to a level where, finally, he is ready for the true (Christian) Revelation. Schelling's notion of second nature thus oscillated between the end of nature on the one hand, and on the other, the reassertion of nature in human history—a move conceived in terms of natural history, as a natural process.

Schelling's parade of gods and mythologies—whose sequence is supposed to reflect the successive dominance of the three potencies, leading up to the Revelation—may seem singularly irrelevant both to nineteenth-century and to present concerns; but he comes surprisingly close to Adorno in questioning the dichotomy of ahistorical myth/nature and 'historical being'.[24] For all its oneiric qualities, Schelling's concept of second nature provides impulses for reflection: do not the ideologues of the free market effectively invoke a 'second creation' that causes this market and its political superstructure to develop in a quasi-autonomous way? The succession of mythologies has given way to economic logic; even those who are opposed to laissez-faire capitalism and favour some degree of regulation—for instance in the fields of biological research and climate control, like Fukuyama, Stern or Diamond—seem to buy into the naturalization of the current politico-economic order. Despite the fact that this regime has also given rise to a new unnatural history that ravages the planet, and created technologies that alter the substance of humanity itself, responses to these developments nonetheless remain within its bounds. Even if it leads in the end to both social and ecological collapse, two centuries of scientific and fictional scenarios have made such an outcome seem familiar, or even acceptable.

Entropic resignation

The inevitability of the end of life has become a commonplace—notably through popular versions of the notion of entropy, as enshrined in the

[24] In arguing that 'there is already an implicit historical dynamic in the great myths', Adorno refers to Chronos killing Uranus and being himself dethroned by Zeus, a succession dear to Schelling. Adorno, 'Idee der Naturgeschichte', p. 363.

Second Law of Thermodynamics. As Rudolf Arnheim summarized this development in the early 1970s:

> When it began to enter the public consciousness a century or so ago, it suggested an apocalyptic vision of the course of events on Earth. The Second Law stated that the entropy of the world strives towards a maximum, which amounted to saying that the energy in the universe, although constant in amount, was subject to more and more dissipation and degradation. These terms had a distinctly negative ring. They were congenial to a pessimistic mood of the times . . . According to Henry Adams's witty treatise, *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, 'to the vulgar and ignorant historian it meant only that the ash heap was constantly increasing in size'. The sun was getting smaller, the Earth colder, and no day passed without the French or German newspapers 'producing some uneasy discussion of supposed social decrepitude'.[25]

When Arnheim was writing this, the artist Robert Smithson was busy marshalling entropy behind his own anti-Idealist notion of history, in which minimalist sculpture, ruins, urban sprawl, natural disasters and strip mining are so many signs pointing towards an entropic end-time when 'the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing sameness'.[26] Despite Smithson's postmodern credentials, Jennifer Roberts rightly argues that such a notion not so much resists as it naturalizes 'the concept of a predetermined, eschatological history', and that it provided Smithson 'with a cosmic endorsement for his own aversion to activism, political or otherwise'.[27] Smithson's own monuments to this eagerly anticipated end-time—ranging from the unspectacular 'monuments of Passaic', described and depicted in his famous photo essay, to the 'Spiral Jetty'—remain important. But they can also be seen as part of a questionable project of naturalization: natural history conceived on a grand scale as an inevitable decline and collapse, as a spectacle of destruction contemplated with joyful complicity.

In the Marxist spin on Hegelian conceptions of second nature, from Lukács to Guy Debord, 'social habit' as second nature came to be reinterpreted as commodity fetishism and its ideological illusions. Debord

---

[25] Rudolf Arnheim, *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order*, Berkeley, CA 1971, p. 9.

[26] Robert Smithson, 'Entropy and the New Monuments' [1966], in Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, Berkeley, CA 1996, p. 11.

[27] Jennifer Roberts, *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, New Haven, CT and London 2004, p. 9.

asserted that 'the fetishistic, purely objective appearance of spectacular relations conceals the fact that they are relations among men and classes: a second nature seems to dominate our environment with its fatal laws.' These quasi-natural 'fatal laws' can, on the one hand, appear thoroughly teleological and linear, an inevitable process in which people constantly have to adapt to progress; on the other hand, they can present themselves as an eternal return of economic growth and recession, of war and peace, of work and leisure. The tightly structured and compartmentalized time of the spectacle becomes, as Debord noted, 'quasi-cyclical', but this quasi-cyclical temporality is plotted on its other, the axis of fatalist progress, which is indistinguishable from ruin.[28]

Time and again Robert Smithson referred to dinosaurs and their extinction, lauding artists who illustrated deep-time episodes at the New York Planetarium and the Museum of Natural History for realizing in visual form 'expendable "conceptions" of ultimate catastrophe, based on the more inaccessible regions of "space and time." In their minds they have travelled into the forbidden zones, into the dazzling realms.'[29] From an entropic point of view, the dinosaurs are very much present: we too are dinosaurs. Or are the dinosaurs just certain nations, certain classes? TV reports from hurricane-stricken New Orleans, the majority of whose struggling inhabitants were poor and black, suggested a future primeval landscape in which nature punishes those who have lost out in the economic survival of the fittest.

Overman returns

Foucault and others in his wake have characterized modern society as the regime of biopolitics. In older social formations, the biological human body was not as such the subject of politics; modern biopolitics involves the medicalization of the population, ensuring lower infant mortality and an unprecedented level of health care.[30] As the management of human *bios,* biopolitics is tendentially always the transformation of first nature by second nature into something else: taking care of human nature imperceptibly becomes improving it, whether in a racist or an

[28] Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* [1967], Paris 1992, pp. 26, 149–64.
[29] Mel Bochner and Robert Smithson, 'The Domain of the Great Bear' [1966], in Smithson, *Collected Writings*, p. 33.
[30] See in particular Michel Foucault, *'Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, New York 2003.

apparently more benign ideological context. It thus would seem that biopolitics involves a typically modern, progressive, linear approach to history: measures are taken to ensure a healthier and more productive—and more manageable—population in the future. Yet the temporality of biopolitics can also bite its tail, in the form of dreamlike scenarios of a return to lost greatness.

Nietszche's *Übermensch* was conceived as such a return. For Nietzsche, Darwin's notion of natural selection was too deterministic: (human) nature is far more flexible and amenable to artificial moulding. While modern society had created masses of paupers and proletarians, levelling hierarchies and eroding culture, the eternal return would ultimately lead to a reversal of this process, creating a new breed of sovereign aesthetes beyond Christian morality. However, nature may not work quickly enough, and Nietzsche entertained the fantasy of an elite that takes control of this eternal return. Disgusted by the second nature of historicist culture, by the oppression of life by a mania for the historical and the copying of the forms of ancient and non-Western cultures, Nietzsche stated that the *Übermensch*—himself an artificial creation—would act as 'a hothouse for strange and choice plants'.[31] With this phrase he seems to come close to Huysmans, yet his vision of an artificial, unnatural nature is to an extent renaturalized by his recourse to tried and trusted models, even if these were not to be slavishly copied. As the result of an active intervention in the eternal circle, the *Übermensch* was to be a second or third coming of the Renaissance aristocrat and the antique Athenian, blissfully devoid of Christian morality.

The product of a breeding programme, Nietzsche's overman is effectively a fictitious form of third nature. Both Idealist and—to a lesser degree—Marxist thinkers were reluctant to reflect on the transformation of first nature by developments in science and technology. Second nature is not only a superstructure imposed on first nature; it intervenes in it to generate the third nature of unnatural history. If second nature is becoming more and more 'dematerialized' due to information technology, leading to neo-Idealist visions of a clean and dematerialized capitalism—witness

[31] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente. Herbst 1887 bis März 1888*, in Nietzsche, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 8, part 2, Berlin 1972, p. 90 [fragment 153]. While Nietzsche frequently used the term *Kultur* in the now dominant sense, to refer to a society and its achievements (as in 'Renaissance culture'), passages such as this remind us that the Latin *cultura* referred first and foremost to agriculture and horticulture.

the recent craze for companies to set up shop in *Second Life*, the much-hyped and tellingly named online community—the rise of third nature is a stark reminder of the phantasmal character of such claims.[32] In principle, third nature is as old as human intervention in first nature, but it has only become truly visible and thinkable with modern developments in science and technology—generating fantasies of an end to disease and even a triumph over mortality, while also leading to fears of ecocide. For the third nature of ecological collapse is the obverse of that of biopolitical improvement. Needless to say, its effects will not be fatal for those economic and genetic overmen who can afford the latest technology to survive the Katrinas of the new nature.

The interrelationship between biopolitics and climate change had already been indicated, in a phantasmagorical register, by Charles Fourier in the early nineteenth century. Convinced that he had found 'laws of attraction' in the psychological realm to match those of Newton in the physical world, Fourier proceeded to propose a reform of society in accordance with these laws—with human nature. The association of free human beings in the Phalanstery would not only result in humanity attaining its true destiny, but also in changes in the natural environment. Fourier's famous pronouncement that the ocean would be turned into lemonade is indicative of his extreme faith in the transformability of nature, provided human society is capable of mending its ways. In a stunning text on the 'material deterioration of the planet', he averred that the noticeable cooling of the planet—there was indeed a series of extremely cold years in the early nineteenth century—was in apparent contrast with the expected warming of the climate due to industrial pollution.[33] This strange, illogical course taken by nature could only be explained by the planet's reaction to the sick and unnatural social order that prevailed: a social evolution in the Fourierist direction, by contrast, would effectively

[32] In a different use of the term 'third nature', McKenzie Wark in 2001 defined it as 'the transformation of both nature and second nature into an information landscape capable of controlling the process of transformation of nature into second nature' ('Spatial Discussions', available at www.nettime.org). In restricting 'second nature' to material culture, and using 'third nature' to denote information technology, Wark seems to assent to quasi-Idealist 1990s' constructions of the 'New Economy'. I see no reason to distinguish information technology as such from second nature, though it certainly is a crucial factor in the transformation of first and second nature *into* third nature.

[33] Charles Fourier's 'Déterioration matérielle de la planète', in René Schérer, ed., *L'Écosophie de Charles Fourier. Deux textes inédits*, Paris 2001, pp. 31–125.

turn the world into a land of plenty. Grandville's famous lampoon of Fourier's utopia in a drawing depicting roasted birds falling from the sky does cruel justice to this aspect of Fourier's writing. But his adoption of folk-utopian motifs also gives great force to his vision, and underlines the benefits of radical change. In stark contrast to Gore or Diamond, Fourier argued that the entire social system needed to be changed for the planet to survive.

The biopolitical spectacle

Foucault was curtly dismissive of the suggestion that modern society may be a 'society of the spectacle', refusing even to mention Debord's name. Rather, Foucault insisted that 'we are much less Greeks than we believe. We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism.'[34] In his final years, the notion of biopolitics came to complement and in part to displace the notion of discipline, the biopolitical administration of life now appearing as fundamental to both 'democratic' and 'totalitarian' forms of government, a subtler as well as more radical and pervasive form of power. But Foucault, who identified the notion of spectacle with the public tortures and executions of the Ancien Régime, was hardly a discerning critic of the Debordian conception of the spectacle, based as it is on the reified representation of social relations in commodities. In the end, do not the biopolitical procedures theorized by Foucault end up absorbed by, and transformed into, spectacle? Just as forms of biopolitics have spectacular value—as in *Kraft durch Freude*, for instance—the spectacle increasingly becomes biopolitical, as exemplified by the rise of plastic surgery.

Referring to Foucault's late works, Bruno Latour remarked that modern society cannot be overthrown because it has been designed not to be; while this is strictly speaking little more than a sophism, as if the designers' intentions guaranteed success, the odds are not exactly favourable.[35] Any break will have to be forced from small cracks within the existing order, small mutations in its repetitious progress. Perhaps in this situation the grotesque figure of Mickey Cuvier, protagonist in a group of installations by the artist Mark Dion, can serve as a dysfunctional model

[34] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, Paris 1975, p. 253.
[35] Bruno Latour, 'Let the Dead (Revolutionaries) Bury the Dead' (2006), available at www.bruno-latour.fr.

of sorts. A blend of Mickey Mouse and the great taxonomist Georges Cuvier, who was involved in the early reconstruction and classification of extinct animals shortly after 1800, this character—represented by a Mickey Mouse doll—presides over various study-like arrangements, including one called *The Taxonomy of Non-Endangered Species* (1990), with a shelf of preserve jars containing pop mutants like Pink Panther, Woody Woodpecker and Big Bird. Cuvier exploded the symbolic order of his day by means of a rigid taxonomy of extinct creatures, even while denying the evolution of species; Disney was the creator of a group of new artificial species. In melding the two in the figure of Mickey Cuvier, Dion has created an unnatural hybrid that is more than the sum of its parts, suggesting the need to question any ideologization of first, second and third nature as immutable fate.